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THE SPINNING OF FATE IN HOMER

B. C. DIETRICH

AMONG the different concepts of fate in Homer the image of the spinning of fate in particular invites the attention of the student of religion; for an explanation of the origin and significance of the spinning of fate in Homer will lead to a better understanding of the complex workings of fate in Homeric epic. The central problem that needs to be examined here concerns the probable origin of this image. In other words, is it possible to maintain that the connection of the act of spinning with fate is solely due to the Homeric poets, or does the idea of a spinning of fate derive from popular religious belief? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to pursue two main lines of investigation. Firstly, it will be essential to examine the context in Homer where the spinning of fate occurs and, as well, to consider whether the agents who are engaged in this activity dispense a particular fate which can be granted in no other way. Secondly, from a study of the available evidence for popular religion, it will be possible to suggest the extent to which popular belief can be held responsible for shaping this image of the spinning of fate.

I

Moirai or Aisa (the Klothes) three times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are pictured as spinning the fate of a person. Hecuba says of her dead son that at birth Moira spun this fate for Hector, that he should be devoured by dogs far from his parents:

τῷ δ' ὥς ποθι μοῖρα κραταιή
γυγνομένῳ ἐπένησε λίνῳ, ὅτε μιν τέκον αὐτή,
ἀργίποδας κύνας ἄσαι ἐὼν ἀπάνευθε τοκήων. (Il. 24.209 ff.)

Hera proposes to save Achilles on that day, but afterwards he may suffer whatever Aisa spun for him at birth:

ὑστερον αὐτε τὰ πείσεται, ἄσσα οἱ αἶσα
γυγνομένῳ ἐπένησε λίνῳ, ὅτε μιν τέκε μήτηρ. (Il. 20.127 f.)

In the *Odyssey* Alcinoos promises Odysseus to convey him safely to his home; afterwards he may suffer what Aisa and the "heavy" Klothes spun for him at birth:

ἐνθα δ' ἔπειτα
πείσεται ἄσσα οἱ αἶσα κατὰ Κλωθῆς τε βαρεῖαι
γυγνομένῳ νήσαντο λίνῳ, ὅτε μιν τέκε μήτηρ. (Od. 7.196 ff.)

Two points immediately strike the reader of these passages. Firstly, the spinning is expressed in what might be called a formula;¹ and secondly, this particular fate of each hero is spun at the moment of birth.² Also it would seem that *αἴσα* and *μοῖρα* are interchangeable in the context, except perhaps for the epithet *κραταιή* applied to *μοῖρα*; but this adjective is quite commonly found with *μοῖρα* in the *Iliad*.³ It is certainly impossible to infer from these passages that *αἴσα* was the original spinner in Homer,⁴ or that *αἴσα* in this form gives evidence of an old goddess who was the spinner of fate. Indeed, *μοῖρα* and *αἴσα* occasionally are interchangeable in Homer⁵ in passages where no different shade of meaning in these words can be detected. The best example of this is found in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*, where Hermes is despatched to bid Calypso release Odysseus:

οὐ γάρ οἱ τῆδ' αἴσα φίλων ἀπονόσφιν ὀλέσθαι,
ἀλλ' ἔτι οἱ μοῖρ' ἐστὶ φίλους τ' ἰδέειν καὶ ἰκέσθαι.⁶

Here the poet uses two different impersonal expressions to say the same thing. Similarly, in the three passages cited above it makes no difference whether *αἴσα* or *μοῖρα* is the subject of the formula; and it would be fruitless to attempt to prove on internal evidence that *μοῖρα* or *αἴσα* is the first "spinner" in Homer.

An examination, however, of the passages in Homer where *αἴσα* occurs, reveals that apart from the two instances in which *αἴσα* is said to spin a fate, the word nowhere possesses personal force. In fact, Aisa had no place in popular belief as an independent figure honoured by cult, and tended to be assimilated in later literature to the usage of the impersonal Moira, as can already be seen from Hesiod.⁷ Nor is the case of Klotho, or the Klothos, very different in this respect. *Κλωθώ* is a transparent personi-

¹See below n. 64.

²Cf. M. P. Nilsson, "Goetter und Psychologie bei Homer," *Archiv f. Religionswissenschaft* 22 (1923/24) 387 = *Opuscula Selecta* (Lund 1951) 1.386.

³*Il.* 5.83; 629; 16.334; 853; 19.410; 20.477; 21.110; 24.132; 209. U. Bianchi, ΔΙΟΣ ΑΙΣΑ (Rome 1953) 53–54, depending on this epithet, wishes to see in this Moira the old "antagonista" which is distinct from *αἴσα*. He had at first more correctly seen the interchangeability of *μοῖρα* and *αἴσα* in this context, *μοῖρα* having been used in *Il.* 24. 209 for metrical reasons, see pp. 52–53. Mr. Hainsworth kindly pointed out to me that *αἴσα* and *μοῖρα* may occasionally in Homer make a pair of synonyms, like *ἄλγος* and *κῆδος*, *εὐρεῖ πόντῳ* and *οἶνοπι πόντῳ*, such that one begins with a vowel and the other with a consonant. Cf. H. Duentzer, *Homerische Abhandlungen* (Leipzig 1872) 530.

⁴This has been maintained by Bianchi, *op. cit.* (see n. 3) 54.

⁵See n. 3.

⁶*Od.* 5.113 f. Cf. also *Od.* 5.288 f. with 344 f.

⁷See E. Leitzke, *Moira und Gottheit im alten griechischen Epos* (Diss. Goettingen 1930) 75. Cf. U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (repr. Basel 1956) 1.352, n. 1. Once Aisa figures as one of the three Moirae in a poem by an unknown author

fiction of κλώθειν,⁸ and is linguistically analogous to 'Ραψώ, which was probably formed from ῥάπτειν.⁹ Therefore it is unlikely that the Klothes were old, independent figures in popular belief; and they do not furnish evidence of the existence of such old spinsters. Not κλώθειν but the verb (ἐπι)νεῖν is used in connection with αἶσα and μοῖρα. We do, however, possess notices of cults in honour of Moira, or the Moirae, both independently and in association with other deities; yet even here there is no evidence to suggest that these figures were connected in popular belief with the spinning of a general fate for men. Certainly, if there had existed a figure that was thought in popular imagination to spin fate, the poets of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were unaware of it, because they make no particular deity responsible for this activity; and it has been seen that in this connection the use of αἶσα and μοῖρα is quite interchangeable.¹⁰

Nevertheless, as seen above, apart from this interchangeability of the subject, the act of spinning in the three passages in question is described in a formula. This would suggest that the Homeric poets might well have taken over from early belief the image of spinning and applied it to their idea of the workings of fate. That is to say, that here we have perhaps a kind of syncretism between Homeric and popular belief. If in popular belief there existed the figure of a woman who was thought of as spinning particular experiences in the life of a person, the Homeric passages under discussion might well echo such a belief. This could mean that the *association* in Homer of Moira and Aisa with the image of spinning was new and might indeed be classified as "poetische Erfindung,"¹¹ but it is possible that the poet's invention was confined to making new agencies responsible for a function—the spinning of certain events in a person's life—which was of long standing in popular belief. Krause¹² claims that the pre-Indo-European people of the Mediterranean area believed in the figure of a female spinner as a power of fate, and that

who says that Aisa, Klotho, and Lachesis, daughters of Night, are weaving on ἀδαμαντίναισιν . . . κερκίσιν, *Anth. Lyr. Gr.* (Diehl) 2.159. Leitzke, *op. cit.* 35, on the strength of this passage assumes that the Klothes were old, independent figures in popular belief. C. M. Bowra, in a recent article (*CQ* 52 [1958] 231–240) follows Wilamowitz (*Isyllos von Epidauros, Philol. Untersuch.* herausgegeben von H. Kiessling and U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff H. 9 [Berlin 1886] 16) in seeing Simonides as the probable author of these lines.

⁸Κλώθω in the plural occurs once only in Homer in the passage quoted above and becomes, together with Lachesis and Atropus, one of the three Moirae in Hesiod, *Theog.* 218. Cf. Hes. *Asp.* 258; Plato, *Rep.* 10.617c; Luc. *Hist. Conscr.* 38 (Klotho, Atropus).

⁹For 'Ραψώ see Eitrem, "Moira" *RE* 15.2.2485–2486; and compare Stais, *Eph. Arch.* (1900) 244–246; Bianchi, *op. cit.* (see n. 3) 204, n. 5; 220.

¹⁰See n. 3.

¹¹Wilamowitz, *op. cit.* (see n. 7) 1.352. Cf. below p. 98; 100.

¹²"Die Ausdrücke fuer das Schicksal bei Homer," *Glotta* 25 (1936) 151–152.

the Greeks took over such a figure from the inhabitants they found in Greece and described her with their words for fate.¹³ The available evidence is not enough to substantiate such a theory; in fact, no evidence concerning spinning women in European and Eastern popular religions seems to point to an early "Spinner" as an absolute power of fate.¹⁴ It seems more reasonable to suppose that a popular image of spinning was added to the concept of fate at some later date in Greek religion, even perhaps by the Homeric poets.¹⁵ How this syncretism could have been achieved is best expressed in a detailed answer to the two questions: what grounds are there for supposing that in the popular belief of Greece and of other countries there obtained a custom or rite of spinning, and what connection did such a rite have with birth or fate in general. The evidence in the case of Greece derives from notices which describe the religious and magic strength of the act of spinning and the material spun at the moment of birth. Again, illuminating in this respect is the fact that the spindle plays an important part as an attribute of goddesses of nature and birth. More decisive evidence is forthcoming from the mythology of a good many other peoples who believed in a female spinner or spinners present at the birth of a person.

The act of spinning and weaving, which formed part of a woman's task from very early times¹⁶ in Europe as well as in Asia Minor,¹⁷ did not remain a simple domestic skill but assumed symbolic strength connected with important aspects of life and particularly of a woman's life: the spindle could be a significant attribute of a goddess¹⁸ whose functions

¹³Krause, *Glotta* 25 (1936) 151-152, further asserts that this concept of a female spinner is found only in Greece, Italy, and Germany, of which the last country borrowed it from the south; and that subsequently the idea of spinning was transferred to the gods. See also "Zeus und Moira bei Homer," *Wien. Stud.* 64 (1949) 51, n. 127. For the gods and spinning in Homer see below.

¹⁴Cf. also below p. 93.

¹⁵The image of spinning is by no means the only one that has become associated with the workings of fate in Homer. Other verbs from the craftsman's vocabulary also did service in this connection, such as weaving and sewing—on this point see further below. Moreover, in later literature we also hear of a singing of fate: H. Fraenkel, according to Leitzke, *op. cit.* (see n. 7) 36, n. 43, connects the singing with the spinning of fate and derives both from popular magic. Women, he believes, were wont to sing wishes into the thread they were spinning, to influence the life of the owner of the completed garment. Cf. also Catullus, *Carm.* 64. Another source, Hyginus, *Poet. Astron.* 2.15, tells of a myth according to which Prometheus learns of Zeus' fate by listening to the song of the Parcae. Cf. also Plato, *Rep.* 10.617c.

¹⁶R. B. Onians, *CR* 38 (1924) 5, maintains that men, too, from early times were wont to spin and weave.

¹⁷See, e.g., J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*³ (New York 1935) 1.113-114; 8.119 and n. 5; 11.100. W. Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte* (Berlin 1875) 1.65; 76, n. 5 etc.; and see S. Eitrem, *Symb. Osl.* 13 (1934) 57-58.

¹⁸Cf. Pliny, *N.H.* 28.28.

were not associated with the house, but who commonly was a nature goddess like Artemis and her Thracian equivalent Bendis.¹⁹

Examples of representations in art of deities or priestesses with the attribute of spindle or distaff or both are not confined to Greece but have been found as well in Asia Minor. Owing to the scarcity of information at our disposal regarding such finds it is not always certain, however, whether the spindle or distaff invariably represented true divine attributes, or whether they must be thought of as having marked out general characteristics of female figures or deities. Bianchi gives a full discussion of such representations,²⁰ and we need only cite a few important instances here. In the Artemisium at Ephesus there was found an archaic statuette of a standing female figure in the typical attitude of a spinning woman holding a spindle and a distaff.²¹ The figure is seen wearing a headdress which suggests that of a priestess,²² so that this statuette may not represent a goddess at all. Apollodorus²³ tells us that spindle and distaff were the attribute also of the Palladium of Ilium,²⁴ while Pausanias²⁵ mentions that there was a wooden image of Athene Polias in her temple at Erythrae, and that the goddess *καὶ ἡλακᾶτην ἐν ἑκατέρᾳ τῶν χειρῶν ἔχει*.²⁶ Other notices refer to similar figures with the same attributes in the East as well as in Greece.²⁷ Although, as Bianchi points out, the exact nature and significance of such figures is not always known, they do bespeak the occurrence of the spindle and distaff as attributes even of goddesses; and it is more than unlikely, therefore, that these attributes must be understood merely as symbols of a well known female occupation—spinning. This is supported to some extent by the epithet *χρυσηλάκατος* given to various goddesses in Homer, Sophocles, Pindar, and Bacchylides. Unhappily, however, it is uncertain here whether this word refers to a golden spindle (distaff) or to a golden arrow.²⁸

¹⁹See S. Eitrem, *Symb. Osl.* 13 (1934) 57; 58 and n. 1 where he quotes Macurdy, *TAPA* 43 (1912) 73.

²⁰*Op. cit.* (see n. 3) 211–215.

²¹D. G. Hogarth, *The Archaic Artemisia* (London 1908) 158.

²²Bianchi, *op. cit.* (see n. 3) 211; cf. F. Poulsen, *Der Orient und die fruehgriechische Kunst* (Berlin 1912) 101.

²³3.12.3.

²⁴Cf. some coins in W. Doerpfeld's, *Troja und Ilion* (Berlin 1902) figs. 92–93.

²⁵7.5.9.

²⁶It is not certain, however, whether the two *ἡλακᾶται* are spindles, distaffs, or both; see C. Blinkenberg, "L'image d'Athéna Lindia," *K. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Hist.-filol. Meddelelser* 1.2 (1917) 19, n. 4.

²⁷See Bianchi, *op. cit.* (see n. 3) 213–214.

²⁸The precise significance of *χρυσηλάκατος* merits a separate discussion. Here it must suffice to mention the uncertain etymology of *ἡλακᾶτη* (see W. Prellwitz, *Etym. Woerterb. d. gr. Spr.*² [Goettingen 1905] 172; A. Bezzenger, *Beitr. z. Kunde d. indog.*

II

Now there is some evidence that in popular belief the act of spinning and of weaving was connected with magic,²⁹ although it is not always quite obvious what particular type of magic is worked in this manner. Pliny tells us,³⁰ for instance, that in Italy women were forbidden to spin as they walked on the high roads; nor were they allowed to carry spindles openly. Frazer³¹ explains this custom, for which he finds parallels in the East, as an example of homoeopathic magic: the twirling of the spindle was thought to turn the corn ripening on the fields, or even the unborn baby in the womb. More relevant to our purpose, however, are a number of European and Eastern customs which involve the winding of thread on a spindle as a symbolic rite at the time of sowing; often, too, the motion alone of spinning a variety of objects was believed to induce or promote fertility of the fields.³² This extended significance of spinning perhaps gives an indication of the meaning of the spindle in the hands of a goddess of nature, although it must be admitted that, as far as our knowledge of Greek cults is concerned, no example is extant where spinning was used to promote fertility.

For more information on this subject we have to consider the magical properties of the material spun—wool and flax. Wool was extensively used in popular rites in Greece and in Italy, both in its raw form when newly shorn and still unwashed, and when already spun and wound into a clew.³³ The cults and customs in which wool was used were sometimes of an expiatory or apotropaic nature, but more often they were connected with fertility of the fields and in the home. Wool was offered up to the spirits of a house, and to the gods of the field; wool, too, still unwashed and containing the grease of the sheep—*οἶσυνος*—formed part of an

Spr. [Berlin 1878] 4.330; F. Solmsen, *Beitr. z. gr. Wortforsch.* [Strassburg 1909] 121–122; H. Frisk, *Gr. Etym. Woerterbuch* [Heidelberg 1958] Lief. 7 q.v.; cf. M. Ventris-J. Chadwick, *Docs. in Mycen. Grk.* [Cambridge 1956] 388), and the double meaning of *χρυσήλακος* as an epithet of Artemis in Homer (in *Il.* 20.70 f.; 16.183 it refers to the golden arrow of Artemis. In *Od.* 4.122, it describes her attribute—the spindle). Later poets use it to describe Artemis' quality as *καλλίτοχος* (e.g. *Hom. Hymn.* 5.16; 118; 27.1. Bacchylides, 10.38. Soph. *Trach.* 637), but occasionally this title is given to other goddesses who have no connection with the bow and archery (Amphitrite, in Pind. *Ol.* 6.104; the Nereids, in Pind. *Nem.* 5.36; Leto, in Pind. *Nem.* 6.35; the Charites, in Bacchyl. 8.1). Therefore, as far as literary evidence is concerned, *χρυσήλακος* does not always refer to a goddess' connection with the distaff and spinning.

²⁹S. Eitrem, *Symb. OsI.* 13 (1934) 58, who also cites *Nord. Tidskr. f. Philol.* (1919) 30–31.

³⁰*N.H.* 28.28.

³¹*Op. cit.* (see n. 17) 1.113.

³²See Frazer, *op. cit.* (see n. 17) e.g. 7.95; 97; 102–103; 187; 8.119; 33.

³³See especially Pley, *De lanae in antiquorum ritibus usu* (Giessen 1911) *passim*.

offering to Demeter at Phigalia.³⁴ In May the new Eiresione was hung with wool³⁵ in rites which quite obviously are “Fruchtbarkeitsriten.”³⁶ Of interest is the notice in Hesychius which mentions the Attic custom of suspending a clew of wool from the doorposts of a house at the birth of a girl.³⁷ Of course, it is possible that some customs of this kind may mean little more than that the girl was expected to be industrious at her task of spinning,³⁸ but in view of the magical properties of wool in connection with fertility and birth, such an explanation will not often be enough.³⁹

In flax, like wool, special powers were believed to reside, so that it too, was frequently used for medicinal purposes in unspun form, as a linen thread, and even when still a seed, to cure female ailments and especially infertility. This plant and its product were not, however, as widely accepted in ritual as was wool, for the simple reason that its use was introduced into Greece later than that of wool,⁴⁰ which, because the “older” and less expensive material, was more commonly employed in religious usage.⁴¹

The magic contained in the material and released by the act of spinning is most potent when connected with fertility and birth. In the case of early Greek belief this is clear to a certain extent from what has already been said, especially concerning wool and flax and the spindle as an

³⁴Paus. 8.42.11.

³⁵See Kroll, “Lana” *RE* 12.1.594–596; 601.

³⁶M. P. Nilsson, *Gesch. d. gr. Rel.*² (Muenchen 1955) 1.123–124; 530.

³⁷*S.v.* στέφανον ἐκφέρειν. Compare the Roman custom of placing the fleece of a sheep sacrificed by the *flamen* on the threshold of the bride’s new house, Kroll, “Lana” *RE* 12.1.600. The bride, too, was wont to bind the doorposts of her new house with wool, Pliny, *N.H.* 29.30; Servius on *Aen.* 4.458.

³⁸This seems a reasonable explanation of the presence of slave girls in a wedding procession who follow the bride carrying distaff, spindle, and wool, Kroll, “Lana” *RE* 12.1.600.

³⁹Of relevance here is the fact that wool as well as flax and the seed of the flax plant were often used in treatments of gynaecological complaints and infertility, see Olck, “Flachs” *RE* 6.2.2445; 2449 etc. Cf. Kroll, “Lana” *RE* 12.1.601 and Pliny, *N.H.* 29.30–38.

⁴⁰According to Olck, linen was used for women’s garments in Homer (perhaps even as armour for men—*λινόθωρηξ*—see *Il.* 2.529; 830), as can be seen by the fact that there is some evidence for the use of oil in weaving, e.g., *Od.* 7.107. Cf. Plut. *de Pyth. or.* 396b; Olck, “Flachs” *RE* 6.2.2439–2445. The use of linen for garments, sails, nets, etc. quite probably was generally known to the Mycenaeans, if we are to believe that the Linear B form *ri-ne-ja-jo* is equivalent to *lineiāōn*, which is a derivative of *λίνον*, Ventris-Chadwick, *op. cit.* (see n. 28) 159; cf. 131; 295; 319.

⁴¹Was it a thread of linen or of wool with which Moira and Aisa spun their fate in Homer? In view of the properties of both materials a conclusive answer is hardly vital. *Λίνον* is usually translated as a thread of linen, but, as Olck points out, “Flachs” *RE* 6.2.2445, this word may originally have been used to describe any thread—even one of wool.

attribute of goddesses of nature and birth. Therefore, although no instances remain of a popular Greek practice of spinning at birth,⁴² this concept was so “fundamental” among Indo-European peoples,⁴³ that it is reasonable to suppose such a practice to have obtained in Greece also at an early period. What evidence there is from other sources describes a ritual of spinning at the birth of a person, which originally perhaps was thought to facilitate birth or ensure fertility.⁴⁴ Such a spinning was normally performed by one or several women. In Old Norse, for instance, they were called the *Norns*, *Metten(a)* in Anglo-Saxon, while in Middle High German such women were given the name of *Gaschepfen*. These figures have parallel functions to the German *Frau Holle*, the Nordic *Urdh* and the Slavonic *Siwa*.⁴⁵ In short, “the wealth of legend that grew up around this belief would make mockery of any attempt to regard it as a mere figure of speech.”⁴⁶ In these cases, the magic energy released by the act of spinning was felt to extend over and in some measure influence the life of a new-born person by granting him good or evil. It would be wrong, however, to think of these figures performing their magic act as true deities or dispensers of a universal fate, mainly because they did not transcend the level of popular belief in which they were thought to bestow their gifts in accordance with a person’s virtue or industry; none of them will bear exact comparison with the image of a spinning Moira or Aisa in Homer.⁴⁷ As far as can be judged, then, there did not exist in popular belief a fully developed concept of a divine figure as a spinner of general fate which the Homeric poets might have taken over. They did, however, possess the knowledge of a common popular rite of spinning which was practised at the moment of a birth, and which—whatever its precise original significance—in some way exerted a magic influence over the life of a person.

Now, Aisa was a late personification and of no consequence in popular

⁴²For modern Greece see J. C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion: a Study in Survivals* (Cambridge 1910) 124; B. Schmidt, *Das Volksleben d. Neugriechen u.d. hellenische Altertum* (Leipzig 1871) 212.

⁴³See R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*² (Cambridge 1954) 352.

⁴⁴See n. 29.

⁴⁵For the relevant literature concerning these figures, see E. Mogk, “Birth” in *Hastings, Encyclopedia of Rel. and Ethics* 2.663; cf. A. B. Cook, *Zeus* (Cambridge 1914–40) 2.65–66, n. 1; and Onians, *op. cit.* (see n. 43) 352.

⁴⁶Onians, *op. cit.* (see n. 43) 352. Onians, *ibid.*, cites a number of other instances of this type of spinning woman.

⁴⁷For sources and a discussion of this point, see especially Bianchi, *op. cit.* (see n. 3) 218–219, n. 2. The contrast between the above mentioned figures, whose functions were limited to certain aspects of fate, and Moira achieving the stature of a more universal power, is well brought out by Bianchi, *ibid.*: “Moira non è stata ridotta, se non occasionalmente, al semplice ruolo di fata o di *weise Frau*, ma ha anzi evoluto verso altre nozioni più generali di destino.” Cf. also pp. 33–34; 35–36.

religion. The same cannot be said for Moira whose position in cult, in common faith as revealed by inscriptions, and in Orphic belief betrays her long religious history. There are two important features of the cult and cult connections of Moira or the Moirae which may well explain the reason for the fact that in Homer the popular ritual of spinning is applied to Moira and related personifications, although the context in which the spinning occurs has no longer anything in common with fertility or magic. Firstly, Moira or the Moirae in popular belief were closely connected with birth;⁴⁸ so much so indeed, that some scholars believe that Moira originally was a deity of birth.⁴⁹ There is not, unfortunately, sufficient evidence to support this theory;⁵⁰ we do, however, find some inscriptions—which, even though late, may point to cults of long standing—where Moira is at times connected in cult with the deities associated with birth in Greek religion: Eileithyia, Artemis, and the Nymphs.⁵¹ In fact, Eileithyia's connection with Moira was to earn her the title of *εἰλωος* in the Hymn dedicated to her by the Lycian Olen.⁵²

The second feature becomes evident from a consideration of Moira's function on the occasion of a birth. Normally the explanation offered is that Moira or the Moirae appear to bring luck or bear gifts to the new born infant,⁵³ presumably exercising a function similar to that of the Muses in literature.⁵⁴ Such a belief in the kind offices of the Moirae at birth would be supported by the beneficent functions which were later added to their sphere in literature.⁵⁵ It must be believed, however, that

⁴⁸Compare their function in literature, e.g. Bacchyl. 5.140 ff.; Ovid, *Met.* 8.451 ff.; Hygin. *Fab.* 191: Meleager; Pind. *Ol.* 1.26: Pelops; *Ol.* 6.41 f.: Iamus; cf. *Nem.* 7.1. See also Eitrem, "Moira" *RE* 15.2.2485–2486.

⁴⁹E.g. L. R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States* (Oxford 1896–1909) 5.447; P. C. Bonaventura-Pistorio, *Fato e Divinità nel Mondo greco* (Palermo 1954) 78–79. M. Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions* (Paris 1949) 163, believes that the Moirae were goddesses of destiny and birth, and that they were "fileuses" by virtue of their nature as "divinités lunaires." He bases his belief in the Moirae's connection with the moon on a late passage from Porphyry, probably influenced by philosophy, and on an Orphic text.

⁵⁰Although Moira's connection with birth is of long standing in popular belief, she probably does not become a deity of birth until much later, see e.g. M. P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*² (Oxford 1949) 170; 303.

⁵¹See e.g. G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus collecta* (Berlin 1878) 238; cf. 314.8; and see *Eph. Arch.* (1900) 244. For the functions of Artemis and the Nymphs at birth, see Nilsson, *op. cit.* (see n. 36) 1.494–495; 248–249.

⁵²Paus. 8.21.3. Pausanias says that Eileithyia owed this epithet to her close relationship with *Pepromene*.

⁵³See Farnell, *op. cit.* (see n. 49) 5.447; Nilsson, *op. cit.* (see n. 36) 1.363–364, n. 3.

⁵⁴E.g. Hesiod, *Theog.* 81 ff.; Callim. *Epigr.* 21 (Pfeiffer); Hor. *Od.* 4.3.1 ff.

⁵⁵Such as presiding at weddings (e.g. Arist. *Birds* 1731 ff.; Pind. *frag.* 30 [Schroeder] = 19.7 ff. [Tury]; Catull. 64.306 ff.; cf. Pollux, 3.38; Dio Chrysost. *Or.* 7, p. 135. See also Pistorio, *op. cit.* [see n. 49] 83), at the foundation of a city (Pind. *Ol.* 7.62 ff. [Lachesis]; Aesch. *Agam.* 130 is an exception), at the institution of games (Pind. *Ol.* 10.58), and the like (see Eitrem, "Moira" *RE* 15.2.2487–2488; Pistorio, *op. cit.* [see n. 49] 82, n. 2).

originally Moira's presence at a birth had more sinister implications, to judge from the fact that her gifts could also be unwelcome. In slightly differing versions of the Galinthias myth, for instance, the Moirae and Eileithyia delay the birth of Heracles with a piece of homoeopathic magic similar to that described above—Eileithyia sits with crossed knees and hands clasped in her lap.⁵⁶ Again, in a version of the Meleager myth, which Rose calls the non-epic folktale version,⁵⁷ the Moirae visited Althaia seven days after her son's birth and told her that he would live until a brand then on the fire should have burned away.⁵⁸ Here, in this Meleager myth the function of the Moirae at birth in popular belief is quite clear: they mark out at the birth of a person the moment of his death, although in this instance, after the manner of folktales, Althaia is pictured as the arbiter of her son's ultimate fate.⁵⁹

Such functions, then, which, according to cult notices and funeral inscriptions, Moira performed at the birth of a person,⁶⁰ furnish a vital

⁵⁶Cf. Pliny, *N.H.* 28.59. See also H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*⁶ (London 1958) 207. For the Γαλανθίς (Γαλινθίας Anton. Liber. 29) story, see Ovid, *Met.* 9.281 ff.; Anton. Liber., *ibid.*—Moira and Eileithyia. Pausanias tells us (9.11.3) that Hera sent the Φαρμακίδες to stop Heracles' birth. On the identity of Μοῖραι and Φαρμακίδες see W. Roscher, "Die sogenannten Pharmakiden des Kypseloskasten," *Philologus* 47(1889) 703–709; cf. Frazer in his ed. of Pausanias on 5.18.2.

⁵⁷*Op. cit.* (see n. 56) 258; *OCD*, s.v. "Meleager" (1).

⁵⁸For the story see Apollod. 1.8.2–3 and Frazer's note *ad loc.*; Ovid, *Met.* 8.273 ff. Homer does not know the story of the firebrand (*Il.* 9.529 ff.).

⁵⁹Moira is well known in popular belief as representing death for a mortal quite generally, as can be seen from inscriptions (e.g. *IG* 12.2.489.9; 5.302; 8.92. 14.1839.1; *Anth. Pal.* 7.685; Kaibel, *op. cit.* [see n. 51] 517; 537 etc. See A. Mayer, *Moira in griech. Inschriften* [Diss. Giessen 1927] 7–12), or Moira can stand for a death that is assigned (ἐλογχε) to a person, presumably at birth (*IG* 12.7; 119; 120; 122. From this concept very probably the Moira was developed who grants a man a certain span of life, see e.g. the inscription from Smyrna, μοῖρα δὲ σή, Ματρεά, ἦν τρι[έ]της, in J. Geffken, *Griech. Epigramme* [Heidelberg 1916] 217.6. See also Prof. R. Lattimore's discussion of the fates and spinning, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* [Urbana 1934] ch. 5, in the course of which he states: "Nowhere have I found any mention of the process of cutting or breaking the spun thread of life to signify death"), for we know a γενέτειρα Μοῖρα who also gave death (Kaibel, *op. cit.* [see n. 51] 287). Indeed, the λάχος of death which a person received at birth by Moira in all likelihood was an important part of Greek popular belief (see also Mayer, *op. cit.* [see n. 59] 9; Wilamowitz, *op. cit.* [see n. 7] 15).

⁶⁰See the previous note. A word of caution is necessary here regarding the value of funeral inscriptions as a pointer to early popular belief. Many of these inscriptions are couched in Homeric language and might well merely reflect the religious belief of Homeric epic which may differ in a number of respects from early popular belief. In fact, the numerous epitaphs describing Moira as the spinner of death bear witness to a retention of epic thought (see also below). On the other hand, Moira's functions in Homer often represent those she exercised in popular religion, and moreover, while the funeral inscriptions appear in Homeric language, in many instances they essentially mirror popular thought from the earliest times. On this point see especially Mayer, *op. cit.* (see n. 59) 31.

clue in an estimation of the significance of the three Homeric passages under examination. In each instance the spinning is done at birth: γεινομένης (γιγνομένης) . . . ὅτε μιν τέκε μήτηρ (τέκον αὐτή). Furthermore, the fate spun is always of an unwelcome nature and it is at least indirectly concerned with the death of the hero;⁶¹ but never does this fate extend over the whole life of the hero.⁶² The misfortune, or death, or manner of death is, of course, a single event, or a restricted period of events, which is spun for a man, or, as Nilsson puts it, enmeshes him in its toils, for that is the force of the verb ἐπινέω.⁶³

III

As we have seen, the occupation of spinning goes back to very early times and it, like the material spun—flax and wool—became associated in popular belief with ritual and magic, particularly potent at birth and quite generally in fertility rites. We have, however, no knowledge of an early concept of the spinning of a general fate in popular belief. Of the magic which was felt to reside in the material spun or which was released by the act of spinning no trace remains in Homer. The formulaic portion of the verse in the three passages under discussion speaks of a spinning at birth, and this idea very probably is based on ancient tradition; but it is remarkable that the subject is unimportant to the formula⁶⁴—the spinner could be Moira or Aisa. In fact, the mention of Aisa as a spinning woman is, to say the least, surprising, since Aisa did not have any place in popular cult and belief. The obvious answer suggests itself that the Homeric poets might have taken over the image of spinning and shaped it to their own use, perhaps to heighten the dramatic effect of the scenes

⁶¹This is quite plain from the context. The passage from Book 24 of the *Iliad* is self-evident. In Book 20 the force of line 127 can be seen from the previous sentence . . . ἵνα μή τι μετὰ Τρώεσσι πάθῃσι|σήμερον. The same holds true for *Od.* 7.197. Furthermore, Odysseus' remark in 11.224 f. seems to be in direct answer to 11.196 f.: ἰδόντα με καὶ λίποι αἰὼν|κτῆσιν ἐμὴν, δμῶας τε καὶ ὑπερεφές μέγα δῶμα.

⁶²Cf. Eitrem, *Symb. OsI.* 13 (1934) 56–57.

⁶³*Arch. f. Religionsw.* 22 (1923/24) 387 = *Opusc. Sel.* (Lund 1951) 1.387. Nilsson aptly compares this significance of ἐπινέω with ἐπιέννυμι as in ἐπιειμένος ἀλκήν. The idea of a binding of fate, as mentioned by Nilsson, is more fully worked out by Onians, *op. cit.* (see n. 43) 310–342, who mentions the Homeric passages on spinning on p. 335.

⁶⁴This word has been used here for the sake of convenience and not in the strict sense of fixed or immutable formula, because, as can be seen in the three passages under discussion, the verbal forms and word arrangements are not exactly the same in each instance. The essential factor, however, is the traditional element of the image of spinning—always expressed here by a form of —νέω—at birth, while the slight variations of description call to mind those of certain thematic themes in Homer which “are on the whole fixities of the poem, as indeed they were of the world from which the poems arose” (C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* [Harvard 1958] 250).

in question.⁶⁵ The Homeric model of Moira spinning death for a person became an attractive theme for later poets⁶⁶ and found its way into numerous inscriptions.⁶⁷

It now becomes evident that Moira and Aisa do not by the act of spinning dispense a particular type of fate. When Hecuba in *Il.* 24.209 ff. believes that Moira spun for Hector an unpleasant fate which he was to suffer at his death, she does no more than describe in imaginative language a slightly extended function which was very common for Moira in Homer. For, apart from the instances where *μοῖρα* signifies a “portion” or “share” in Homer, or is used in adverbial phrases like *κατὰ μοῖραν*, it stands for death or for the agent who inflicts death, or quite generally is concerned with death twenty-seven times out of thirty-three in the *Iliad* and eight times out of a remaining seventeen in the *Odyssey*. Two examples illustrate particularly well that *μοῖρα* in Homer can be used to describe the death which is certain for a mortal from birth.⁶⁸ Hector in *Il.* 6.487 ff. assures Andromache that he will not die before his appointed time, but that no man—base or noble—has escaped death, once born:

μοῖραν δ' οὐ τινά φημι πεφυγμένον ἔμμεναι ἀνδρῶν,
οὐ κακόν, οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλόν, ἔπην τὰ πρῶτα γένηται.

In *Od.* 24.28 f. Agamemnon says that bitter *μοῖρα*, which no mortal avoids, first drew near Achilles,

ἦ τ' ἄρα καὶ σοὶ πρῶτα παραστήσεσθαι ἔμελλε
μοῖρ' ὀλοή, τὴν οὐ τις ἀλεύεται, ὅς κε γένηται.

Again, the suffering and perhaps even death spun for Achilles (*Il.* 20.127 f.) and for Odysseus (*Od.* 7.196 ff.) are expressed in the same form, ὅστερον αὐτε τὰ (ἐνθα δ' ἐπειτα) πείσεται ἅσσα οἱ αἶσα. But this form recalls two passages in the *Odyssey*. In Book 5 Calypso knows of Odysseus' impending shipwreck and therefore tells him that he would accept her offer of immortality, if he knew what suffering it was his *αἶσα* to undergo:

ὅσσα τοι αἶσα
κῆδε' ἀναπλήσαι, πρὶν πατρίδα γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι (*Od.* 5.206 f.).

⁶⁵The same explanation might to some extent apply to the image of the scales in Homer in which Zeus weighs the *κῆρες* of an army or of individual heroes, *Il.* 8.69; 22.209; see e.g. W. C. Greene, *Moira—Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought* (Harvard 1948) 16.

⁶⁶E.g. Callinus, *Anth. Lyr. Gr.* (E. Diehl) 1.3, no. 1: θάνατος δὲ τότε ἔσσεται, ὁππότε κεν δῇ | Μοῖραι ἐπικλώσωσ' . . . Cf. *Il.* 22.365 f. = 18.115 f.; Bacchyl. 5.142 ff., τὸν δὲ | μοῖρ' ἐπέκλωσεν τότε | ζωᾶς ὄρον ἀμετέρας ἔμμεν.

⁶⁷E.g. Kaibel, *op. cit.* (see n. 51) 542; 336; 300; *Anth. Pal.* 7.99, etc. See Mayer, *op. cit.* (see n. 59) 25–29.

⁶⁸Cf. a similar use, where *κῆρ* = death in *Il.* 23.78 f. *Il.* 10.71 is not quite the same.

Similarly, Athene (*Od.* 13.306 f.) offers Odysseus her aid, and tells him what suffering to expect in his own palace:

εἴπω θ' ὅσσα τοι αἶσα δόμοις ἐνὶ ποιητοῖσι
κῆδε' ἀναπλῆσαι

Αἶσα, it is true, is not used of Odysseus' death in either of these passages. Nevertheless in all other respects the word is used here in just the same way as in *Il.* 20.127 f. and *Od.* 7.196 f. except that it is not personified. The obviously late personification⁶⁹ of *αἶσα* which was apparently not founded on popular belief, as well as the addition of the *Κλωθες* in *Od.* 7.197, do reasonably suggest that the image of the *spinning* Aisa, like that of the *spinning* Moira, was a poetic development by means of which the common usages of *αἶσα* and *μοῖρα* in Homeric epic were expressed in a more picturesque manner.

This point raises the last issue in this investigation. Apart from Moira and Aisa, the gods several times in Homer are said to spin a fate for men. More precisely, the gods collectively appear as spinners six times in Homer,⁷⁰ Zeus once by himself (*Od.* 4.208), and a daemon once (*Od.* 16.64), bringing the total to eight, compared with the three instances when Moira and Aisa appear in this image. Nevertheless here too, as in the case of Moira and Aisa, it would seem a fruitless speculation to attempt to establish conclusively which of the two groups of agents was the first to be associated with the concept of spinning.⁷¹ Nor is it known whether the picture of spinning Olympians or even daemons was current in popular belief outside Homer,⁷² and it must remain unlikely in the face of the evidence available at present.⁷³ On closer examination, however, it becomes plain that what the gods spun for mortal men in Homer they could and usually did grant in simpler terms, so that one can suppose, as in the case of Moira and Aisa, that the Homeric poets used a colourful image to describe the usual functions of the gods. Nilsson wants to make a clear distinction between what Moira and Aisa, and

⁶⁹*Αἶσα* nowhere else in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is personified.

⁷⁰Once in the *Iliad* and five times in the *Odyssey*: *Il.* 24.525; *Od.* 1.17; 3.208; 8.579; 11.139; 20.196.

⁷¹O. Schrader, for instance, *Neue Jahrbuecher* 43 (1919) 77, believes the concept of Zeus the spinner to be secondary; cf. Krause, *Glotta* 25 (1936) 152.

⁷²Onians, *CR* 38 (1924) 5, claims that there were male spinners in very early times. Pliny, *N.H.* 19.18, mentions that it was not undignified for men to spin flax.

⁷³Onians, *CR* 38 (1924) 4–6; *op. cit.* (see n. 43) 303–309, ingeniously suggests that the Homeric phrase “on the knees of the gods” is connected with the act of spinning; *ταῦτα θεῶν ἐν γούνασι κείται* occurs five times in Homer: *Il.* 17.514; 20.435; *Od.* 1.267; 400; 16.129.

what the gods spin.⁷⁴ According to him, the gods never spin a life, but separate events, such as misfortune, destruction, and so forth. We have seen, however, that Moira and Aisa do not spin the whole span of life. Furthermore, it can be said quite aptly of the gods that they spin, if not a whole life, yet certain conditions that extend over prolonged periods of life, as when they spin misery for men,⁷⁵ or a life of wandering for Odysseus.⁷⁶

It will be noted, however, firstly that the gods' spinning is always expressed by forms of *ἐπικλώθειν*, secondly that here there is no particular formula which recurs in every instance, and finally that the spinning of the gods extends over a much wider field of human experience, so that quite evidently the image of spinning, when applied to the gods, is used to express a number of divine functions. None of these functions is unique, however, in the sense that it cannot be paralleled by one performed in a simpler fashion. Thus the gods spun misery for men (*Il.* 24.525; *Od.* 20.196 [for kings], but compare these instances with *Od.* 14.39; and *Od.* 4.174; cf. *Il.* 10.71 [Zeus]); they spun return for Odysseus (*Od.* 1.17, compare with *Od.* 5.169; 23.258; 24.401; 4.480 etc.), they spun no such *ἄλβος* for Telemachus (*Od.* 3.208, compare with *Od.* 8.413 etc.), they spun the doom of Troy (*Od.* 8.579, compare with *Il.* 9.278), and the wandering of Odysseus (*Od.* 11.139, compare with the above cited examples of his return, and *Od.* 23.258 ff.; 286; cf. *Od.* 5.286). Once a daemon spins Odysseus' wandering (*Od.* 16.64, compare with the previous examples). Finally, Zeus is once described as spinning *ἄλβος* at marriage and birth (*Od.* 4.207 f., compare with *Il.* 24.534). Therefore the gods are never said to spin a fate which they could not give in another way; and this is a point which calls to mind the fact that in Homer the gods, and other agents, often are depicted as fashioning, joining, fitting, building a trick, or evil, or even death against another. The verbs, of course, in these images are borrowed directly from the carpenter's or artisan's workshop—*τεκταίνομαι*, *τεύχω*, *ἀρτύω* etc.⁷⁷ The same applies to words of weaving, sewing—*ὑφαίνω*, *ράπτω*.⁷⁸

⁷⁴*Arch. f. Religionsw.* 22 (1923/24) 387 = *Opusc. Sel.* (Lund 1951) 1.387.

⁷⁵E.g., *Il.* 24.525.

⁷⁶*Od.* 11.139. This is done by a daemon in *Od.* 16.64.

⁷⁷E.g., *Il.* 10.19; *τεκταίνομαι* is still used for building ships in *Il.* 5.62. For *τεύχω* of the craftsman, see *Il.* 6.314; 14.166; *Od.* 12.347 etc. Compare these with *θάνατον τεύχειν* *Od.* 20.11; *δόλον ἤρτυε* *Od.* 11.439; *ἤρτυον ἄλθερον* *Od.* 16.448; compare *Od.* 20.242 etc.

⁷⁸See *ιστόν ὑφαίνειν* *Il.* 6.456; *Od.* 2.104 etc. Compare these with *δόλον ὑφαίνει* *Il.* 6.187; *μῆτιν ὑφαίνειν* *Od.* 4.678; 739. Similarly *ράπτειν* is used of sewing, stitching oxhides *βοείας* *Il.* 12.296, but Homer also knows, *φόνον ἐράπτομεν, θανάτῳ τε μόρον τε ῥάπτει* *Od.* 16.379; 421 f.; *κακὰ ῥάπτομεν* *Od.* 3.118; cf. *Il.* 18.367.

CONCLUSION

The well known concept of the spinning of fate in Homer—it occurs eleven times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—is an instructive example of the use the Homeric poets made on occasion of popular belief, in order to create new religious concepts or picturesque expressions. There are three important considerations which have a bearing on the development of this image in Homer. Firstly, the presence of Aisa and the Klothes, who unlike Moira are two late personifications with no standing in popular belief, as spinners of fate shows that it is at best unlikely that this concept was transferred in its present form from popular cult to Homer. Secondly, the formulaic shape of the three passages where Moira or Aisa spin seems to preclude the assumption that in the idea of spinning we have nothing but a “poetische Erfindung.” Finally, the spinning of fate is accomplished at the moment of birth. These points suggest a conclusion that in the image of the Homeric spinning of fate we can find a syncretism of popular belief and epic thought. Now, there is no trace of evidence in what is known of popular religion of a divine figure that spins a general fate for men; what evidence there is, however, points to a wide-spread belief in the magical properties of the material used for spinning, and of the act or rite of spinning which itself belonged to the province of divine figures and other agents associated with fertility and in particular with birth. In the case of Greece these features of religious practice are apparent from the use made of wool and flax, and from the spindle as an attribute of deities connected with birth and nature; in the case of other peoples from a host of mythological evidence. Thus, the image of Moira or Aisa spinning a fate at birth would not sound strange to an Homeric audience, especially since Moira herself in Greek thought was connected with birth, in addition to her functions in cult together with goddesses of birth and nature. In mythology and popular belief Moira’s function at the birth of a person was to mark out the moment of his death. This trait of Moira is not apparent in Homer, although here too the impersonal *μοῖρα* often stands for death. This Homeric usage of *μοῖρα* may well echo popular belief; but it does not allow us to find a special significance in the fact that the spinning in the three passages discussed describes a fate which is either directly connected with death, or which may possibly lead to the death of a hero. When the normally impersonal *μοῖρα* and *αἴσα* in Homer are given personal force and said to spin a fate, they do acquire the colouring of popular religious figures, but in no case does the fate spun differ from that dispensed by *μοῖρα* and *αἴσα* in other ways. Precisely the same is true when the concept of spinning is applied to the gods. The question, whether it was Moira and Aisa, or the gods who were

first thought to spin in Homer, must remain unsolved; it may, however, be stated that if in fact the Homeric poets took the image of spinning at birth from popular belief, then perhaps Aisa and particularly Moira were the *primores* in this respect, because in their case the formulaic aspect of the act of spinning is still more carefully preserved, and because the gods can spin a good as well as an evil fate which extends over a much wider field of human experience. The significant fact remains, however, that in the concept of the spinning of fate we can see a junction of popular with epic thought which proved to be of great moment to subsequent literature, whether the fate was seen to enmesh a person or grant him *δλβος*; and from this new religious concept Plato⁷⁹ drew his magnificent image of Ananke with spindle and distaff, who with the help of Lachesis, Klotho, and Atropos determines the lots of life.⁸⁰

⁷⁹*Rep.* 10.616 b-d; cf. Onians, *op. cit.* (see n. 43) 306–307.

⁸⁰I am very grateful to Professor R. P. Winnington-Ingram and Mr. B. Hainsworth for reading and criticising drafts of this paper.